

'It Was Like Seeing Daylight Again'

# 'Cacti Green' Patrol Recalls 20-Hour Ordeal

By SP4 Craig MacGowan

**OASIS**—"It was the hairiest experience of my life."

Those were the words of First Lieutenant Thomas Hahn of Riverside, Calif., as he summed up the feelings of the five men and two Kit Carson Scouts of Company D, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, who were separated from their company during a night combat assault.

During their 20-hour ordeal the Famous 4th Division soldiers were responsible for killing five NVA and resourcefully implementing their own rescue.

The men were part of a Delta Company mission to reinforce an element of the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry in heavy contact near a downed gunship.

After realizing they were separated from their unit, the men made an attempt to get back with their company. Platoon Sergeant Ralph H. Bales of Danville, Ill., made the first move when he began signaling SOS to some of the remaining choppers flying away from the area, without success.

The Ivymen also realized that they could not move forward because the enemy was between them and their unit. The other avenue of escape was to the rear by crossing the river. But NVA were also stationed across the river.

So they decided to stay. The seven Ivymen remained in a tight defensive perimeter for approximately 15 minutes when helicopter gunships started dropping parachute flares and the first crack-

ing of small arms fire was heard some 500 meters away.

**"WE KNEW** immediately we couldn't stay out there and be exposed," recalled Lieutenant Hahn.

A tense dark night lay ahead for the seven men. So, with the aid of the Carson Scouts, they selected a well camouflaged position.

"Everybody had M16s, a few grenades, and I had a Claymore," said Specialist 4 Edward Byrd of Pocahontas, Va. "That was our main defense."

Throughout the night they could hear the sporadic exchange of small arms and grenade fire between the enemy force and the rest of the company.

Then at approximately six o'clock the following morning the men got their first glimpse of the enemy as six NVA passed near their position carrying one of their dead.

The men did not panic.

"We could have ambushed them," explained Lieutenant Hahn, "but we did not want to give away our position."

Soon after the first sighting of the enemy, Sergeant Bales started toward what had been the original landing zone the night before to "pop" a smoke signal in hopes that a chopper would spot it and look for them.

He had just started to move out when two more NVA came down a nearby trail.

"Then the shooting started," recalled Specialist 4 James P. Rogers of Belding, Mich. "One ran across in front of me and I shot him. Sergeant Bales shot the other one."

**SUDDENLY**, their first concern was for survival. The men changed their de-

fense tactics. An ambush was set up along the trail being used by the enemy. The men stationed themselves so that if the first man didn't get the enemy as he came down the trail, the others would.

"They didn't know we were there," said Lieutenant Hahn. "They had no idea of our ambush setup."

As each enemy soldier fell, the men carefully removed the body from the trail, concealing it in the bushes, making certain to get the AK47 or SKS, ammo and Chicom grenades.

Periodically, members of the ambush would leave and try to flag down a helicopter.

This ambush process went on throughout the day until the men killed their fourth and fifth NVA shortly before 2 p.m.

For six hours, the men of the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, waved towels, T-shirts and ace bandages fastened to make-shift staffs to attract the attention of helicopter pilots, but to no avail.

Pressure mounted, but the Ivymen were cautious not to reveal their position, even though they knew they couldn't remain in that location another night. It was evident that they would have to try for the river and look for their company.

"Then Sergeant Bales started waving his towel faster when a Cobra gunship made a low pass," said Specialist 4 Andrew Scott Jr. of Besemer, Ala. "And I told Specialist Byrd I thought Sergeant Bales got us one."

The ship returned, making two banking passes. Help was on the way. Five minutes later, a Huey helicopter came in and picked them up.

**SPECIALIST** Rogers remarked of their extraction, "I didn't think a chopper could come in so close after us because there was so much action in the area."

The 20-hour-ordeal was over. The gallant men of Company D, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry were on their way back to safety.

At the 3rd Brigade's forward base camp headquarters, the Ivymen had time to grasp fully what had just happened.

"It's hard to explain how you keep your mind in control. You're going to try to survive, but you never know what it's going to be like," commented Lieutenant Hahn.

It was like "seeing day light again" for Specialist Scott. "It seemed like everything was dark until that chopper picked me up—then things just seemed right. Everybody was smiling and happy," he added.

Sergeant Bales commented, "These men fought like veterans. It was the first time two of them had ever been in contact. I'm proud of them."

The Ivy platoon sergeant also had praise for the Kit Carson Scouts working with the unit.

For their actions in the face of the enemy, Lieutenant Hahn and Sergeant Bales were awarded the Bronze Star with "V" and Specialists Byrd, Rogers and Scott received the Army Commendation Medal with "V" device.

The impact awards were presented to the men by the Famous Fourth's Commanding General, Major General Donn R. Pepke, during ceremonies at Fire-base Tango.